

2/16/23 Thursday

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European Parliament Cuts Passage About Danger of Nuclear War From Resolution on Ukrainian Crisis
By - Fantine Gardinier

When the European Parliament adopted a resolution Thursday on the upcoming one-anniversary of the date that the Ukrainian crisis escalated into a full-blown Russia-NATO proxy war in Ukraine, it omitted a proposed passage about the risk of nuclear war as a result of the bloc's support for Kiev.

The move came at the EP's plenary session in Strasbourg, France, with lawmakers calling for a redoubling of Western support for Ukraine and the prosecution of the Russian and Belarusian officials at a tribunal.

The cut passage had been proposed by the EP's Left Group, a caucus of MEPs from socialist and communist parties. It read: "People across Europe are deeply concerned about a war that could potentially lead to a war between nuclear powers."

The passage should have been uncontroversial: the leaders of all four nuclear powers involved in the conflict - Russia, France, the UK and US - have made explicit statements regarding the potential for nuclear weapons to be used and how they would respond to such a situation. In addition, the possibility of a direct shooting war between NATO and Russian forces has arisen more than once since February 2022, not just due to NATO proximity to the conflict but also the spread of fake news in the Western press.

Meanwhile, in the resolution the EP called for the defeat of Russia at any cost and called on EU member states to adopt the latest tranche of proposed anti-Russia sanctions. It pledged the EP's support for arming Ukraine for as long as necessary and called on Western nations to seriously consider giving Ukraine fighter jets, helicopters, adequate missile systems, and vast quantities of ammunition. The body also pledged its support for Ukraine reconquering five former provinces which joined the Russian Federation after holding plebiscites on the question - votes Western powers have refused to recognize as legitimate.

The resolution was adopted by 444 votes in favor, 26 votes against and 37 abstentions.

Russia launched the special operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, after months of negotiations with Kiev and the NATO powers over Moscow's security red lines failed to achieve results, and amid fears of an imminent Ukrainian offensive against the breakaway Russophone republics in the eastern Donbass region.

The operation aims to halt attacks on Russian-speakers by neo-Nazi forces and prevent the stationing of NATO offensive weapons on Ukrainian soil by rendering Ukraine a neutral state. During the conflict, the two breakaway republics, plus two other Russian-speaking provinces, held referendums on leaving Ukraine and joining the Russian Federation. They followed Crimea, which made the decision in 2014 after a government in Kiev that came to power

following a US-backed coup unleashed attacks against ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians.

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Tesla Recalls Over 350,000 Vehicles Over Crash Dangers Posed by Autopilot
By - Fantine Gardinier

Electric vehicle (EV) maker Tesla announced on Thursday it was issuing a voluntary recall for cars that use its experimental driver-assistance software, better known as autopilot.

According to a notice that appeared on the US National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) website, the Full Self-Driving Beta (FSD Beta) can cause vehicle crashes by allowing vehicles to “act unsafe around intersections, such as traveling straight through an intersection while in a turn-only lane, entering a stop sign-controlled intersection without coming to a complete stop, or proceeding into an intersection during a steady yellow traffic signal without due caution.”

The recall affects Model S sedans made from 2016 to 2023; Model Y sedans made from 2017 to 2023; Model X sport utility vehicles made from 2017 to 2023; and Model Y SUVs made between 2020 and 2023 that have been equipped with or pending installation of FSD Beta. In all, 362,758 vehicles are affected - about 43% of all Teslas on US roads.

According to the notice, Tesla will “release an over-the-air (OTA) software update, free of charge.”

Tesla’s shares suffered at the news, falling by about 5.3%. Tesla’s stock has seen a rough 12 months, losing 72% of its value by January 2023. However, its value has doubled in the month since its nadir.

Tesla’s self-driving ability has been tested on American roads for years and highly criticized for running drivers into embankments, other cars, and through crosswalks as people used them. According to US government data, 11 people were killed in car crashes involving autonomous vehicles in a four-month period last year, 10 of which were Teslas.

Last October, Michael Brooks, executive director of the nonprofit Center for Auto Safety, told US media there was a “pretty clear pattern of bad behavior on the part of Tesla when it comes to obeying the edicts of the (federal) safety act, and NHTSA is just sitting there. How many more deaths do we need to see of motorcyclists?”

However, Tesla cars don’t ship with FSD Beta on them - owners have to pay either \$15,000 up front or \$199 per month for the service, and must meet and maintain Tesla’s standards for driver safety. The company has never disclosed how many Tesla drivers use the service, but CEO Elon Musk hinted to investors that “roughly 400,000 customers” had access to the latest version in a recent earnings call.

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Ford Suspends F-150 Lightning Electric Pickup Line for 'A Few Weeks' Over Battery Fire Issue
By - Fantine Gardinier

Yet another electric vehicle (EV) line has encountered trouble with its lithium-ion batteries catching fire. Ford Motor Company announced on Wednesday it was pausing production and distribution of the electric version of its F-150 pickup truck, dubbed the Lightning.

The decision came after a battery in one of the trucks erupted in flames during a pre-delivery quality check at Ford's Rouge Electric Vehicle Center in Dearborn, Michigan. Earlier this week, Ford said it had paused the F-150 Lightning production line on February 4, but gave no explanation.

A spokesperson for the automobile maker told US media on Wednesday the company expected to finish its investigation by the end of the week, but that it "could take a few weeks" to change the production process afterward.

The battery supplier for the Lightning is the Seoul-based EV battery maker SK On. A new facility for producing batteries for the US market was christened in Commerce, Georgia, in December 2022. It's not known if the battery that caught fire came from that facility. However, no other instances of battery fires have been reported in F-150 Lightnings out on the road.

Ford, which revolutionized both automobile ownership and general manufacturing processes worldwide with an assembly line process in the early 20th century, only began producing EVs in 2011 with an electric conversion of its popular Focus hatchback. However, it has since embraced a number of other hybrid or EV conversions of its classic vehicles, including the best-selling F-150, which is key to its goal of increasing EV production to 600,000 units this year - 150,000 of which it hopes will be F-150s - and 2 million annually by the end of next year. In 2022, the Lightning's first year of full production, Ford sold just 15,000 of the electric pickups. Ford is by no means the only EV maker struggling with a battery issue, though. US domestic rival General Motors was forced to halt production of its Chevrolet Bolt in August 2021, and recall all 141,000 that had been produced, as a result of battery fire risk. Production was only resumed last April.

Tesla, which solely makes electric vehicles, is perhaps [the most notorious](#) for having batteries that enter "thermal runaway," a process by which the highly flammable liquid electrolyte inside of defective lithium-ion battery cells leaks out, heats up, melts, and catches fire, bursting other cells that also catch fire. A Tesla sedan that "spontaneously" burst into flames on a Sacramento freeway last month required 6,000 gallons of water for the fire to be put out.

That said, Ford has struggled to make headway in the EV market against Tesla. Ford recently reported it had lost \$2 billion in 2022, falling short in sales by roughly 100,000 units. However, production shortfalls have been an industry-wide problem since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, which created a massive demand for electronic devices at the same time as it triggered bottlenecks in production, creating a global shortage of semiconductor computer chips.

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Which Freight Trains Have Derailed Across the US in Recent Days?

By - Fantine Gardinier

The United States has suffered numerous train derailments in recent days, which have attracted greater scrutiny following the disaster in East Palestine, Ohio, on February 3, which has continued to unfold.

There are about 1,000 train derailments every year in the US, with broken or defective tracks being one of the most common causes, according to the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA). The vast majority are minor affairs and cause no injuries or spillage, but some can lead to major environmental disasters or loss of life.

Railroads are the backbone of the US economy. According to industry statistics, American freight railroads haul around 1.7 billion tons of raw materials and finished goods each year, or one-third of all US exports. This is in part because the amount of cargo each freight car can carry has increased about 25% over the last 20 years, thanks to new designs, but also thanks to newer, more powerful locomotives that are able to haul longer trains.

Van Buren, Michigan

The most recent derailment was in Van Buren Township, Michigan, outside [Detroit on Thursday](#) morning.

The derailment involved approximately 30 cars on a train operated by Norfolk Southern Railroad - the largest railway in eastern North America. According to the town government, only one of the derailed cars overturned, which was a grain car. One car involved in the accident contained liquid chlorine, but it was not close to the overturned section and there were no reported signs of leakage. There were no injuries reported.

Authorities have not stated any cause for the derailment as of yet, telling the press that "the investigation is active and ongoing, updates will be made to the public as they become available."

Splendora, Texas

A train operated by Union Pacific, the country's second-largest railway and half of a west coast freight-hauling duopoly with BNSF, was rammed by a truck driver in the Texas town of Splendora, to the north-east of Houston, on Monday night. The truck driver died in the crash. According to Union Pacific, 21 cars had become derailed, but none had spilled hazardous materials. The railroad said the chemicals on board the train were "household chemicals," including paint and aerosol cans.

However, the truck spilled about 100 gallons of diesel and about 15 quarts of oil as a result of the crash.

According to Hazmat, air quality was set-up as a precaution as containers were moved. Normal air quality was detected during the whole process," the Texas Department of Public Safety said.

Enoree, South Carolina

Another train in Spartanburg County, South Carolina, was reported as derailed early on Monday. The train was operated by CSX, the other half of a freight duopoly that dominates shipping in the eastern US.

The derailment happened on a spur track associated with industry. No cars were reported as overturning, no leakage of chemicals was reported and no injuries were reported.

East Palestine, Ohio

The situation in East Palestine, Ohio, on the border with Pennsylvania is continuing to unfold nearly two weeks after the crash occurred.

The incident began late on February 3 when, according to preliminary findings released by a National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigation, one of the railcars' wheel trucks suffered a mechanical issue possibly related to a sparking axle, causing 50 railcars to derail. The cars piled up and caught fire, with the [massive flames pouring smoke](#) into the sky.

However, there was more than just smoke: 14 cars on the train were carrying vinyl chloride, with six others carrying a variety of other toxic chemicals, which were also burning. As firefighters attempted to combat the flames, a dangerous change in temperature was detected in one of the chemical tanker cars, and the Ohio and Pennsylvania governors ordered an evacuation in a 1-mile radius around the fire. Norfolk Southern then deliberately lit five of the vinyl chloride-toting cars on fire as part of a "controlled release" to avoid a catastrophic explosion. The resulting fire poured hydrogen chloride and phosgene into the sky: the former is a key ingredient in hydrochloric acid and the latter was [used as a chemical weapon](#) during World War I and was responsible for killing 85,000 soldiers. Although authorities assured residents the area was safe and allowed them to return, many have complained of headaches and trouble breathing for dozens of miles around the crash site, and thousands of fish, pets, and livestock have been discovered dead.

The contradictory government messaging, combined with the incident being largely uncovered in US media for several days after, has led many to [suspect a cover-up](#) of a major ecological disaster is underway.

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Dominion Lawsuit Reveals Internal Fox News Comms, Hosts Knew 2020 Election Claims Were False

By - Ian DeMartino

Following the 2020 election, then-President Donald Trump and his allies spread unsubstantiated claims that the election had been stolen. Fox News personalities and anchors helped spread those claims by repeating them on-air. A lawsuit by Dominion Voting Systems alleges Fox always knew the conspiracies were false.

Fox News anchors and producers privately acknowledged that former US President Donald Trump lost the 2020 election and the claims by him and his allies that the election was wrought with fraud were false. Despite this, the network still peddled those claims according to emails, text, and private messages included in a 200-page document filed as part of a \$1.6 billion defamation suit filed by Dominion Voting Systems against the news network.

"Fox knew," the filing says. "From the top down, Fox knew 'the Dominion stuff' was 'total BS.' Yet, despite knowing the truth – or at a minimum, recklessly disregarding that truth – Fox spread and endorsed these 'outlandish voter fraud claims' about Dominion even as it internally recognized the lies as 'crazy,' 'absurd' and 'shockingly reckless.'"

According to [the documents](#), Fox owner Rupert Murdoch sent an email to Fox News CEO Suzanne Scott about having three prominent Fox personalities - Sean Hannity, Tucker Carlson, and Laura Ingraham - go on television, either independently or as a group, and say "something like 'the election is over and Joe Biden won,'" adding that it "would go a long way to stop the Trump myth that the election was stolen."

According to the lawsuit, Scott forwarded the email to Executive Vice President for Primetime Programming Meade Cooper, and said that the personalities were "there" but that they had to be careful that they don't continue "pissing off the viewers," something she felt they could handle.

One event that seemingly caused Fox News viewers to sour on the program was when the network declared Arizona for Biden before other news stations. According to the lawsuit, the call, though correct, infuriated viewers and the White House.

"We are taking major heat over the AZ call," then Fox News Chief White House correspondent John Roberts said in an email to Senior Vice President and Managing Editor of the Washington Bureau and President Jay Wallace. "Our viewers are also chanting 'Fox News sucks,' something I have never heard before."

On November 18, Carlson wrote to Ingraham: "Sidney Powell [A lawyer working with the Trump team that promised to 'release the Kraken' that would prove the election was stolen] is lying by the way. I caught her. It's insane."

Ingraham responded to Carlson: "Sidney is a complete nut. No one will work with her. Ditto with Rudy."

But it appears that Fox News was hesitant to discredit the conspiracies once they started losing viewers to rival far-right news outlets Newsmax and OAN. Large personalities at Fox even started admonishing their colleagues for saying what they appeared to know was true.

Following a tweet by Trump referring to Fox shows that mentioned Dominion, Fox News reporter Jacqui Heinrich fact-checked the rumors and determined there was no evidence that Dominion committed voter fraud, a conclusion that then prompted Carlson to demand that the reporter be fired.

"Please get her fired," Carlson wrote. "It needs to stop immediately, like tonight. It's measurably hurting the company. The stock price is down. Not a joke." The tweet was deleted the next morning.

In a motion for a summary judgment, Fox News said that its reporting was protected under the First Amendment. "[The] statements Dominion challenges are not actionable defamation because Fox News' coverage and commentary are not only not defamatory, but also protected by the First Amendment and New York doctrines emanating from it," Fox said, referring to the landmark New York Times v. Sullivan case.

Fox also casts doubt on the amount of damages Dominion is asking for. It notes that its majority shareholder, Staple Street Capital Partners, paid roughly \$38 million for its 76% stake in the company in 2018, and that it has never evaluated its value as "anywhere near \$1.6 billion."

In a statement issued in response to the lawsuit, Fox News stood by its reporting and called the claims baseless. "FOX News Media is proud of our 2020 election coverage, which stands in the highest tradition of American journalism, and will vigorously defend against this baseless lawsuit in court."

Defamation suits are extremely hard to prove because the law gives a lot of leeway for media outlets to protect the First Amendment. Dominion not only has to prove what Fox said about them was false, but also that they knew it was false or were recklessly negligent when checking the accuracy of their reporting.

But Ronnell Andersen Jones, a professor of law at the S.J. Quinney College of Law at the University of Utah told [The New York Times](#) that the case has more merit than most defamation suits. "This filing argues a fire hose of direct evidence of knowing falsity," he says. "It gives a powerful preview of one of the best-supported claims of actual malice we have seen in any major-media case."

Multiple Fox executives and media personalities were deposed as part of the Dominion suit. While most major defamation suits are settled if they are not thrown out of court, both sides seem confident that they will prevail and are, publicly at least, appear ready to bring the case to trial.

A judge has scheduled jury selection for the case in mid-April.

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'We Need Peace!': CodePink Anti-War Activist Interrupts Hawley Speech at Warhawk Think Tank

By - Ian DeMartino

Hawley was advocating for the United States to take a more aggressive approach with China. While giving a speech to the notoriously pro-war think tank The Heritage Foundation, US Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO) was interrupted by CodePink organizer Olivia DiNucci who was quickly removed from the stage.

Hawley was speaking about the situations in Ukraine and Taiwan, arguing the United States should limit its funding of the Zelensky regime and focus on a potential conflict in China over the island of Taiwan.

DiNucci was sitting in the front row as the senator began his speech. She then stands up and gets on stage displaying a sign that said: "People & Planet Not War & Aggression CodePink." DiNucci reminded Hawley and the crowd that the US has the largest military in the world. "We spend over one trillion dollars every day," DiNucci said. "[In] your state of Missouri... Over a half the people are in poverty!"

A handler then comes and pulls DiNucci off stage as she continues to yell out her message. "China is not our enemy, the climate crisis is," while the crowd can be heard laughing at the activist. "We need peace and we need diplomacy in Ukraine and with China!"

She then points out that the US spends more on its military than 100 countries combined as she is being removed from the room.

"It's interesting, this administration wants to use the climate crisis as a justification for its agenda in Ukraine and elsewhere. Maybe they ought to visit with that gal," Hawley quipped after DiNucci had been removed.

It is unclear what Hawley was referring to but it may have been the assertion by Biden that the situation in Ukraine and the subsequent energy crisis brought on by NATO placing sanctions on Russia proves countries need to be less reliant on fossil fuels.

"We need diplomacy and peace in Ukraine AND in China too! We need cooperation and to work with China to address our common enemy - the biggest threat to humanity and the planet—the climate crisis. No more escalation!" DiNucci said in a statement posted after being escorted from the building. "There is no excuse for Congress people like Hawley who urge to cut social services while almost half of Missouri is suffering from poverty and systemic racism... We need diplomacy and peace now!"

CodePink describes itself as "a feminist grassroots organization working to end US warfare and imperialism, support peace and human rights initiatives, and redirect resources into health care, education, green jobs and other life-affirming programs."

Hawley was speaking at the Heritage Foundation, a notoriously pro-war think tank. In October, it rated the US military weak, giving the Navy and Space force "weak" grades, the Air Force a "very weak" grade, the Army a "marginal" grade, and the Marine Corps and Nuclear capabilities "strong" grades. It argues for more military funding, despite more than a trillion dollars being spent on the Department of Defense and other war-adjacent programs.

In his speech, Hawley was criticizing current US foreign policy.

"Our actions in Ukraine are directly affecting our ability to deter China in the Pacific. We cannot defend Ukraine and stop China in Taiwan at the same time. ... The United States should "stop writing blank checks to Ukraine," he stated.

Ukraine and Taiwan require Stinger and Javelin missiles, but the US industrial base cannot produce enough for both countries while replenishing supplies for the US armed forces as well with its still limited manufacturing capacity, Hawley said.

"We need a new burden sharing relationship with NATO. The Europeans take the lead in Europe and we take the lead in Asia. ... Our current foreign policy is fanciful and cannot be sustained. ... The Pacific is the key theater for us," Howley said.

The Heritage foundation rose to prominence in the 1980s when it lobbied the Reagan administration to take a hard-line stance against the Soviet Union. The group has been credited for convincing the Reagan White House to call the Soviet Union an "evil empire." According to the Atlantic, former US President Ronald Reagan handed out a condensed version of its "Mandate for Leadership" at his first cabinet meeting.

The foundation also advocated for the war in Iraq and promoted the lie that Saddam Hussein was working with terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda*.

In 2015, emails from the Heritage Foundation leaked and revealed a close relationship with weapon manufacturers, including Lockheed Martin which was one of the foundation's major donors. The emails were dated between 2008 and 2009.

One email quoted a donor, Robert W. Ellis as saying: "You can kill 'em as fast as they're making 'em" in reference to Muslims. Ellis gave \$250,000 to the foundation. Other emails showed donors who believed then-President Barack Obama was a practicing Muslim.

The Heritage Foundation was also instrumental in crafting the AFRICOM strategy developed by the Bush Administration. It established US military bases in Africa with the goal of transforming the continent to be more in line with US interests.

As a statement released by CodePink points out, the US military is the largest institutional consumer of oil and causes more greenhouse gas emissions than 140 nations combined.

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Lawsuit: Alabama Inmate Froze to Death After Guards Placed Detainee Inside Jail's Walk-In Freezer

By - Ian DeMartino

Last year, the Department of Justice admitted it does not know how many people die while in police custody. At least 5,000 such deaths have gone unreported in the last year, according to a 2022 report by the Office of the Attorney General.

A lawsuit filed by the family of a man who died after two weeks in police custody says officers at the jail “likely” locked him in a walk-in freezer until he froze to death.

[The lawsuit](#) cites [surveillance video](#) obtained by the family after a correctional officer spoke out about the incident, as well as the man’s medical report from the hospital.

Anthony Mitchell, 33, was in police custody for two weeks before officers brought him to Alabama's Walker Medical Center, where he was pronounced dead hours later. Police initially said Mitchell was alert and conscious when he left the jail, but video showed three officers carrying Mitchell’s limp body and placing him in a police cruiser.

It does not appear in the video that Mitchell is conscious and at one point the officers, who were not using a stretcher, placed his body on the ground.

According to the lawsuit, Mitchell’s medical records from the hospital state his body temperature registered at 72 degrees Fahrenheit when he arrived at the hospital. Mitchell had no detectable pulse and was breathing 2 to 4 times every minute. An emergency room physician attempted to resuscitate him for three hours but failed. The medical examiner theorized hypothermia was the cause of death.

“I am not sure what circumstances the patient was held in incarceration but it is difficult to understand a rectal temperature of 72 degree Fahrenheit while someone is incarcerated in jail,” Mitchell’s medical report says according to the lawsuit. “I do not know if he could have been exposed to a cold environment. I do believe that hypothermia was the ultimate cause of his death.”

The lawsuit alleges it is “likely” officials left Mitchell in a walk-in freezer or fridge while restrained to a chair.

William Smith, a lawyer representing the family, said they do not have footage of Mitchell being placed into the freezer, but they believe Walker County Jail does, or footage showing what happened to Mitchell.

The correctional officer who first revealed the video showing Mitchell’s limp body being put into a police cruiser has since been fired. She has filed a separate lawsuit against the jail, saying she was fired for speaking out.

The dismissed officer's lawsuit states she was not on duty the day Mitchell died, but heard rumors about his condition during the following days. She says she then checked the security camera footage to find out the "truth" about what happened.

After finding the video, Kelly recorded it on her cellphone. When the video leaked on social media in February, Kelly says she was questioned by jail officials and told them she shared the video with her direct supervisor and another correctional officer at a different facility. She denied sending it to anyone else.

Two days later, according to the lawsuit, she was fired.

The family's lawsuit also contends Mitchell was left laying naked in his cell on January 25 after being returned to his cell from where he was held in the freezer or another cold environment. Instead of providing aid, several correctional officers and medical staff went into his cell "to spectate and be entertained by his condition."

The lawsuit shows pictures of the correctional officers standing outside of Mitchell's cell, appearing to be laughing. It also notes a jail nurse went inside the cell but did not provide medical treatment or call an ambulance "even though [Mitchell's] severe medical distress is obvious."

The next night, according to the lawsuit, another nurse checks in on Mitchell and again declines to provide aid or call an ambulance. It says for the two weeks Mitchell was incarcerated, he was not supplied any kind of bedding and had to sleep on the concrete floor of the isolation cell he was held in until the morning of his death, when a deputy gave him a small pad.

The lawsuit also contends Mitchell was not given any clothing while in police custody until hours before his death. His false teeth had also fallen out when officers tased him while moving him out of a cell. Instead of returning them to him, they kept the teeth in a property bag for holding, presumably for his eventual release or discharge to another facility.

The lawsuit includes images and photos of these events, which they attribute to "the heroic corrections officer" –Kelly– who preserved the footage.

Jon Goldfarb, another attorney representing both the family and Kelly in their respective lawsuits, called it "the worst case of inmate abuse I have ever seen," in a statement to the [New York Post](#).

Mitchell's last moments as a free man were on January 12, when he arrived at the home of his cousin, Steve Mitchell, who says Anthony was suffering from delusions and needed help. Steve attempted to call the local sheriff's office but couldn't reach anyone so he called 911. According to the police report from the incident, Anthony fired "at least one shot" at the officers before retreating to the woods.

The SWAT team was then called in and according to the police report they managed to apprehend Anthony without injury. He was charged with attempted murder. Two weeks later, he was dead.

Goldfarb says the next step is for the sheriff's office to respond to the lawsuit.

"The evidence of abuse would have been buried with Tony Mitchell but for the bravery of a lone corrections officer who made videos of what really happened to Tony and shared one of them," Goldfarb said. "And they fired her for exposing the truth of this abuse."

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Biden: Nothing Presently Suggests Three Downed 'Objects' Were Tied to China or Spy Ops
By - Ian DeMartino

Over the weekend, the US military downed three unidentified objects flying over American and Canadian airspace. The operations were preceded by the US military shooting down what officials later claimed was a Chinese spy balloon.

Four days after shooting down the last of three unidentified flying objects located over American and Canadian airspace, US President Joe Biden [briefed the public](#) on the operation on Thursday, admitting there was no indication the objects were spy balloons from China or any other country.

Biden said that while the objects are still being studied, intelligence officials now believe they were most likely from private companies performing legitimate scientific or weather research. Biden says they were shot down because their altitude posed a risk to civilian aircraft and because at the time they were unsure if their purpose was nefarious.

"We don't yet know exactly what these three objects were. But nothing right now suggests they were related to China's spy balloon program or that they were surveillance vehicles from any other country," Biden said. "Intelligence community's current assessment is that these three objects were most likely balloons tied to private companies, recreation or research institutions studying weather or other conducting other scientific research."

Biden stressed there is no evidence of an increase of objects in US airspace, but we are seeing more of them "partially" because of steps the US took to improve its radar capabilities.

Biden also says he has instructed his team to come up with new rules on how unidentified objects will be handled moving forward with an aim to distinguish between legitimate threats and mundane objects.

Biden also said his administration would work on updating and establishing new rules on launching unmanned objects above American airspace and will instruct Secretary of State Antony Blinken to "lead an effort" to establish global norms regarding unmanned flying objects. Biden also spoke about the Chinese balloon the US insists was a spy balloon, and that which China has repeatedly stated was a scientific research balloon that had blown off course and was launched by a private company.

The president again stressed the military advised him not to shoot down the object while it was over land as doing so would have put people on the ground in danger. Instead, the object was observed and then shot down off the Atlantic coast. Biden said the object's payload has been recovered from the ocean floor and is currently being studied.

"Then we shot it down, sending a clear message: the violation of our sovereignty is unacceptable," Biden asserted.

In response, Biden says that on Friday, they put restrictions on six firms that he says supported the People's Liberation Army Air Force to deny them access to American technology.

Biden stressed that open dialog between the two countries must continue.

"We seek competition, not conflict with China. We are not looking for a new Cold War. I make no apologies and we will compete."

Biden said he will continue to stay in competition with Chinese President Xi Jinping but again stressed he would not apologize.

"I expect to be speaking with President Xi, I hope we are going to get to the bottom of this, but I make no apologies for taking down that balloon."

An Awkward Ending

After his speech, Biden thanked the press core attending the briefing and began walking away without answering questions. The press gaggle screamed questions at him and Biden paused before returning to the podium.

It is difficult to determine what question Biden was replying to but he first said "give me a break man." Then, one reporter manages to be heard over the others, "Mr. President, did you overreact?"

Biden appeared to ignore the question and looked over to the other side of the room, which again erupted with questions from the press. It is again unclear if he responded to the question that could be heard or another, but he continued to look at the other side of the room when he said: "You can come to my office and ask a question when we have more polite people."

Biden then began walking away while reporters continues to yell questions. Biden paused one more time, turned towards the podium, and then walked away. The broadcast then ends.

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Here's a Threat, There's a Threat, Everything's a Threat-Threat - Cartoon

By - Ted Rall

On February 4, Biden ordered the US military to shoot down a suspected Chinese spy balloon - three days after it first became public knowledge. Less than a week later, more objects showed up in the skies, though the government claimed to not know their purpose or origin. They, too, were shot down.

During a media briefing on Thursday, Biden stressed the unknown objects were not threats but then later said he would order similar threats to be shot down, confusing the issue even further. Biden also said he would direct his team to develop criteria to determine which objects are threats and which are benign.

After the news conference, Biden moved to leave without taking questions; however, he momentarily paused as reporters shouted questions at him and appeared confused. He returned to the podium and admonished the press gaggle before saying: "You can come to my office and ask a question when we have more polite people." Biden then walked away again, paused again, then proceeded to the back.

Biden's decision to shoot down the initial balloon increased tensions with China, something he hopes to resolve through conversations with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

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Schumer in Munich Address to Reaffirm US Aid to Ukraine as Calls Grow for Negotiations

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) – US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer is leading a delegation of more than 30 senators to the Munich Security Conference on Friday where he plans to reaffirm US assistance to Ukraine amid doubts from some House Republicans and calls to pursue negotiations, according to his op-ed in The Washington Post.

"To the people of Ukraine, I pledge that the U.S. Senate will not abandon our commitment to stand together in this time of war. I am proud that the Senate, in a bipartisan way, approved \$113 billion in military, economic and humanitarian aid to Ukraine last year," Schumer wrote in an op-ed in The Washington Post that was adapted from his planned speech at the conference. "And while this is a significant investment in our friends in Ukraine, we cannot stop."

Schumer criticized calls for negotiations with Russia from "some on the hard right" in the US and Europe. He argued that a Russian victory in the Ukraine conflict "will not lead to detente but even more Russian belligerence."

He noted majority support in both US parties for continuing aid to Ukraine, including from Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, who is also attending the conference.

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Bipartisan Group of Lawmakers Urges Biden to Send F-16s to Ukraine – Letter

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - A group of US House Democrats and Republicans is calling on President Joe Biden to provide Ukraine with F-16 fighter jets amid an expected escalation on the battlefield, according to a letter obtained by Politico.

"The provision of such aircraft is necessary to help Ukraine protect its airspace, particularly in light of renewed Russian offensives and considering the expected increase in large-scale combat operations," the letter said.

The group includes Democrats Jared Golden of Maine, Jason Crow of Colorado and Chrissy Houlahan of Pennsylvania, as well as Republicans Tony Gonzales of Texas and Mike Gallagher of Wisconsin.

The lawmakers insist that F-16s or similar fighters would give Kiev greater capabilities than ground-based artillery.

"F-16s or similar fourth generation fighter aircraft would provide Ukraine with a highly mobile platform from which to target Russian air-to-air missiles and drones, to protect Ukrainian ground forces as they engage Russian troops, as well as to engage Russian fighters for contested air superiority," they wrote.

On Thursday, Ukrainian Ambassador to the United Kingdom Vadym Prystaiko said Kiev would receive Western fighter jets at a later stage in the conflict and after current military needs are sorted out.

Earlier this month, Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council secretary Oleksiy Danilov said it was only a "matter of time" before the United States provides Ukraine with F-16 fighter jets.

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FBI Reports Cyber Incident Affecting Computer Network

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) – The FBI said on Friday it is investigating a malicious cyber incident affecting some of its computer systems.

"The FBI is aware of the incident and is working to gain additional information," the agency said in a statement to CNN. "This is an isolated incident that has been contained. As this is an ongoing investigation the FBI does not have further comment to provide at this time."

Two sources told CNN that the hacked computer system is believed to have been used for investigations of child pornography, and the hack affected the FBI's New York field office.

One source said that the origin of the hack is still under investigation.

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Pentagon's Top China Official Arrives in Taiwan Amid Balloon Crisis – Reports

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) – US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China Michael Chase has arrived in Taiwan, becoming the first senior US defense official to travel to the island since 2019, The Financial Times reported on Friday, citing a source familiar with the matter.

In 2019, Heino Klinck, then deputy assistant secretary for East Asia, was the most senior US defense official to visit the self-governed island in four decades.

Chase's trip to Taiwan comes amid heightened US-China tensions after a Chinese balloon seen traversing the continental US a few weeks ago sparked a diplomatic furor that led Secretary of State Antony Blinken to cancel his imminent trip to Beijing.

The US contends the balloon was part of an international surveillance program operated by China, while Beijing says it was a meteorological research balloon that was blown off course.

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UPDATE 2 - Trudeau Says Canada to Deploy Navy Vessels, Airlift More MRAPs to Haiti
(Adds details, background, edits throughout)

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - Canada will deploy Navy vessels to conduct surveillance off the coast of Haiti and airlift more Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in remarks at an annual meeting of Caribbean leaders in the Bahamas.

Haiti's acting Prime Minister Ariel Henry previously urged Canada to lead a military intervention, but instead Ottawa has provided piecemeal aid. Canada delivered armored vehicles to Haiti in January, just a few months after Ottawa and Washington sent similar security assistance to counter rising gang violence.

"Today I am announcing that Canada will also deploy Royal Canadian Navy vessels to conduct surveillance, gather intelligence and maintain a maritime presence off the Haitian coast in the coming weeks," Trudeau said on Thursday. "Earlier today, I announced that Canada will airlift another three additional MRAPs, purchased by the Haitian National Police, which are scheduled to arrive in the coming days."

Trudeau said it will equip Haiti with the tools and support to degrade the gangs' devastating impact in the area and to enable the police to be more effective on the ground.

When later pressed on intervening militarily in Haiti, Trudeau told reporters Canada is "elbows deep" in terms of trying to help the island nation.

In a statement later in the day, his office said Canada is also imposing additional sanctions on two Haitian elites tied to gangs and violence. This came within hours of the State Department announcing that the US designated five Haitians involved with criminal organizations.

The release said Trudeau met with several Caribbean Community (CARICOM) leaders - including the prime ministers of The Bahamas, Haiti, Jamaica, and Barbados.

Trudeau also announced C\$44.8 million (\$33.3 million) in new initiatives to boost CARICOM in battling climate crisis by protecting more biodiversity and disaster preparedness, along with C\$12.3 million to address food and nutrition needs, the release added.

Haiti has long been mired in a socio-political crisis that worsened after the assassination of President Jovenel Moise on July 7, 2021. Moise chose Henry to succeed then-acting Prime Minister Claude Joseph in his role but did not manage to ratify his appointment before his death. Nevertheless, Henry was sworn in as the country's prime minister on July 20, 2021, but his appointment caused discontent among various opposition forces questioning Henry's legitimacy.

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Canada to Deploy Navy Vessels to Conduct Surveillance Off Haitian Coast - Trudeau
(Adds details, background in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - Canada will deploy Navy vessels to conduct surveillance off the coast of Haiti in the coming weeks, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in remarks at an annual meeting of Caribbean leaders in the Bahamas.

"Today I am announcing that Canada will also deploy Royal Canadian Navy vessels to conduct surveillance, gather intelligence and maintain a maritime presence off the Haitian coast in the coming weeks," Trudeau said on Thursday.

A central issue has been Haiti's rising killings, rapes, and kidnappings believed to be related to gang activity, which has burgeoned since President Jovenel Moise was assassinated in July of 2021.

Trudeau also announced that Canada is going to provide direct support to bolster the Haitian National Police to equip Haiti with the tools and support to degrade the gangs' devastating impact in the area and to enable the police to be more effective on the ground.

In January, Canada provided the Haitian National Police with armored vehicles to combat gangs and deliver humanitarian assistance. In October of 2022, the United States and Canada had delivered armored vehicles and other security equipment to Haiti to help local authorities in the fight against gang violence amid a grave humanitarian crisis.

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Chevron to Send 100,000 BPD of Venezuelan Crude to US This Month - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - Chevron will send 100,000 barrels per day of Venezuelan crude oil to the United States this month, Reuters reported citing shipping documents.

Chevron made its first shipments of Venezuelan oil to the United States in early January while one vessel with US diluent oil was en route to Venezuela.

Last November, the US Treasury provided a new license that allows Chevron to extract oil in Venezuela for six months through its joint venture partners such as PDVSA. However, this license did not expand operations or allow new US investment in Venezuela's oil sector.

The United States granted the new license after the Venezuelan government and the opposition resumed talks in Mexico City and came to an agreement on addressing the humanitarian crisis in the country, including an agreement on the continuation of talks focused on elections to be held in 2024.

According to US officials, Venezuela-related sanctions and restrictions imposed by the United States still remain in place and this decision should not be interpreted as a permissive environment on sanctions.

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US Support for Ukraine Undermines Ability to Confront China in Asia - Senator Hawley

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - The United States should stop supporting Ukraine unconditionally and turn the burden of doing so over to its European NATO allies while focusing its own armed forces on deterring China from invading Taiwan in the Pacific, US Senator Josh Hawley said.

"Our actions in Ukraine are directly affecting our ability to deter China in the Pacific," Hawley said in a speech at the Heritage Foundation on Thursday. "We cannot defend Ukraine and stop

China in Taiwan at the same time. ... The United States should "stop writing blank checks to Ukraine."

Ukraine and Taiwan require Stinger and Javelin missiles, but the US industrial base cannot produce enough for both countries while replenishing supplies for the US armed forces as well with its still limited manufacturing capacity, Hawley said.

"We need a new burden sharing relationship with NATO. The Europeans take the lead in Europe and we take the lead in Asia. ... Our current foreign policy is fanciful and cannot be sustained. ... The Pacific is the key theater for us," Howley said.

US policymakers and politicians had to start looking reality in the eye and replace fairy tales with the truth because the policies of promoting democracy around the world with military interventions and nation-building had all failed, while ignoring the collapse of the US industrial base at home from free trade policies, Hawley added.

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Pentagon's Top China Official to Visit Taiwan Soon Following Balloon Incident - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China Michael Chase will travel to Taiwan in the first such visit since 2019 amid the rift in relations between Washington and Beijing following the downing of a suspected spy balloon off the coast of the United States, the Financial Times reported.

The senior official, who is currently in Mongolia for discussions with the country's military, is expected to embark on the trip in the coming days, the report said on Thursday.

In early February, the United States detected and later shot down four unidentified flying objects, including the alleged Chinese surveillance balloon. Washington alleges that the balloon was designed to gather intelligence.

However, Beijing insists that the balloon was a meteorological device that entered US airspace accidentally, while expressing protest over Washington's decision to shoot it down.

On Monday, Bloomberg reported that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is considering meeting with China's Central Foreign Affairs Office Director Wang Yi on the margins of the upcoming Munich Security Conference this week. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman refused to confirm the report.

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US Imposes Visa Restrictions on Haitians Allegedly Involved in Criminal Activity - Blinken

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - The United States is imposing visa restrictions on several Haitian individuals and their family members for alleged involvement in criminal activity, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement.

"Today, the United States announces additional steps taken to support the people of Haiti by continuing to promote accountability for individuals who foment violence, corruption, and instability," Blinken said on Thursday. "The State Department has designated an additional five individuals and seven family members as subject to visa restrictions under... the Immigration and Nationality Act."

The policy impacts Haitian officials and other individuals involved in the operation of street gangs and criminal organizations that have threatened the livelihoods of the Haitian people and blocked humanitarian support, Blinken said.

The action sends a clear message of the US' commitment to rooting out corruption and bad actors who underpin lawlessness in Haiti, Blinken added.

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US Army Awards \$27Mln Contract for M1A1 Abrams Tank Turret Armor Swaps - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - The US Army awarded General Dynamic Land Systems a contract valued at more than \$27 million for M1A1 Abrams main battle tank turret armor swaps, the Defense Department said.

The United States is awarding \$27,069,515 to General Dynamics Land Systems for the contract, the Defense Department said in a notice on Thursday.

Work for the contract will be performed in Lima, Ohio with an estimated completion date of November 30, 2023, the notice said.

The contract award was obligated from the Fiscal 2022 Special Defense Acquisition fund and 2023 Foreign Military Sales fund for Poland, the notice added.

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Nuland Says She Would Give Netanyahu Nobel Prize If 'He Gets Putin Out of Ukraine'

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said during a Carnegie Endowment conversation that she would give Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu the Nobel Prize if he uses his influence to help put an end to Russia's military operation in Ukraine.

"If Bibi Netanyahu can get Putin out of Ukraine, I'm going to give him the Nobel Prize," Nuland said on Thursday.

Earlier in February, Netanyahu said in an interview with CNN that he is considering providing military assistance to Ukraine including the iron dome amid Russia's special military operation in the country.

Soon after the interview, Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov confirmed that Israel vowed to provide Kiev with alert technology for such aerial threats as missiles and drones.

Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz said in mid-October that Israel could no longer supply military hardware to Ukraine due to "operational reasons." At the same time, he promised that Israel would help Ukrainians develop an air raid warning system and would provide relief aid. Western countries have increased their military support for Ukraine after Russia launched a military operation there on February 24, 2022. In April, Moscow sent a note to NATO member states condemning their military assistance to Kiev.

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Biden Remains Fit to Execute Responsibilities of US President - Physician's Letter

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden remains fit to execute the office's responsibilities, presidential physician Kevin O'Connor said in a memorandum to the White House.

"The President remains fit for duty, and fully executes all of his responsibilities without any exemptions or accommodations," the letter said on Thursday. O'Connor said he conducted a comprehensive review of Biden's medical history and a detailed physical examination. Biden continues to suffer from occasional gastroesophageal reflux, a stiffened gait and mild sensory peripheral neuropathy of the feet, the letter said. Additionally, one small lesion from Biden's chest was excised and sent for biopsy, with results pending, the letter said. Nevertheless, Biden remains a "healthy, vigorous" 80-year old man who works out five days a week, the letter said.

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Nuland Says Ukraine Will Not Be Safe Unless Crimea at Minimum 'Demilitarized'

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - Ukraine will not be considered safe by the collective West unless Crimea is at a minimum demilitarized, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said.

"No matter what the Ukrainians decide about Crimea in terms of where they choose to fight... Ukraine is not going to be safe unless Crimea is at a minimum demilitarized," Nuland said during a virtual discussion with the Carnegie Endowment on Thursday afternoon. Nuland said the United States supports Ukraine targeting massive Russian military installations in Crimea as it considers them to be legitimate targets.

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Fed's Biggest Hawk Says He Was Not in Favor of Rate Hike Pivot

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - St. Louis Federal Reserve President James Bullard, often viewed as the most hawkish official at the US central bank, said he was not in favor of lowering the quantum of rate hikes in America until inflation came under better control.

"I wouldn't rule out supporting a 50-basis point March hike," Bullard said Thursday, referring to the ideal rate the Fed should agree on at its next policy meeting on March 22.

Bullard's view is at odds with market expectations that the Fed, which reduced the quantum of its rate hikes twice in the past two months, will continue with the so-called rate pivot instead of reverting to last year's aggressive increases.

The Fed has raised interest rates eight times since March last year, adding 450 basis points, in a bid to control runaway inflation. Prior to that, US rates peaked at just 25 basis points, as the central bank slashed them to nearly zero after the global COVID-19 outbreak in 2020.

The Fed's first post-COVID hike was a 25-basis point increase in March. It then moved up with a 50-basis point increase in May. After that it executed four back-to-back jumbo-sized hikes of 75 basis points from June through November. Since then, it has returned to a more modest 50-basis point increase in December and a 25-basis point hike in February.

Bullard said he had not been in favor of slowing down rates at all when the Fed met earlier this month.

"I advocated for a half-point increase to get to an adequately restrictive level faster," he said.

Bullard's comments came after the US Labor Department reported on Thursday that wholesale prices, one of the key determinants of inflation, rose their most in seven months in January, complicating the Fed's job of keeping a lid on prices with minimal rate hikes.

The reading on wholesale prices came two days after the broader gauge of consumer prices for January showed stickier-than-expected inflation.

The back-to-back data on higher inflation prodded Cleveland Fed President Loretta Mester to say on Thursday that interest rates need to rise to above 5% and remain there an extended time in order to bring inflation down meaningfully.

Bullard, when asked how high rates probably need to go, said he viewed a range between 5.25% and 5.5% as "appropriate". Rates currently stand at a peak of 4.75%.

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Canada Endorses Special Tribunal to Investigate Russia - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - Canada supports plans for a special tribunal to investigate Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, Politico reported on Thursday.

"The ICC [International Criminal Court] and ICJ [International Court of Justice] don't necessarily have the mandate to be able to prosecute such a crime," Canada's Foreign Affairs Minister Mélanie Joly was quoted as saying in the report.

The special tribunal, which is also backed by the United Kingdom, would constitute a select group invited by Ukraine to map out a way to hold Russia accountable for actions taken during its special military operation, the report said.

The United States, which has provided the largest amount of military support to Ukraine, has not yet decided if it will endorse the tribunal, the report said. Currently, the ICC does not have jurisdiction over crimes of aggression.

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US Treasury Says No Evidence Russia Evaded Oil Cap, Received Payments Above It

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - The US Department the Treasury has found no hard data or evidence that Russia is evading the oil-related sanctions by using the coalition service providers and receiving above-the-cap payments, according to prepared remarks by Assistant Secretary for Economic Policy Ben Harris for the upcoming Americas Crude Summit in Houston, Texas.

"To my knowledge, there is no hard data or conclusive evidence that supports speculation about Russia evading the sanctions by using Coalition service providers and receiving above-the-cap payments," the remarks said on Thursday.

However, there is every chance that Russia "will aggressively seek non-Western services to avoid the cap," the remarks said.

Western countries have been seeking ways to limit Russia's income from oil and gas exports, as well as their dependence on Russian energy products since Moscow launched a special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The European Union placed on December 5 a price cap of \$60 per barrel on Russian crude oil and was joined by the Group of Seven (G7) nations and Australia.

In late December, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree banning supplies of Russian oil and petroleum products if contracts directly or indirectly provide for a price cap. According to Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, the Russian president did not consult with OPEC+ allies before signing off on these countermeasures.

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Canada Suspends Search for Debris of Aerial Object Downed Over Lake Huron - RCMP

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - Canada suspended its search for debris of an aerial object downed over Lake Huron earlier this week due to adverse weather conditions, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) said in a statement.

"After conducting an extensive search in the Lake Huron area with the assistance of the Canadian Coast Guard and other domestic and international partners, a decision was reached

to suspend the search due to several factors including deteriorating weather and the low probability of recovery,” the statement said on Thursday.

Search and recovery efforts continue in Yukon, where another aerial object was recently downed, the statement added.

The investigation is in “very early stages” but additional information will become available as recovery efforts unfold, the statement said.

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US Attempted to Take Down Alleged Chinese Spy Balloon Over Montana, Failed - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - The United States attempted to take down the alleged Chinese surveillance balloon that transited the country earlier this month while it was over the state of Montana, but failed due to the airship’s high altitude, the Billings Gazette reported, citing several state and US military officials.

On February 1, several F-22 fighter jets and support aircraft flew over the Beartooth Mountains of Montana with the intent of shooting down the alleged Chinese surveillance balloon, the report said on Thursday.

However, the mission failed due to the airship flying at above 65,000 feet – too high for jets to reach – the report said. The F-22 has a published service ceiling of just 50,000 feet, according to an Air Force fact sheet.

The Air Force planned to use the planes’ guns to shoot down the airship as opposed to a missile, given that the object was still over land, the report said. The plan involved piercing the 200-foot balloon so that its payload would gradually descend into the mountains, and away from population centers, for easy recovery, the report said.

Following the failed takedown attempt, Pentagon officials advised US President Joe Biden not to shoot the balloon down over land, the report said. The airship was eventually shot down over the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of South Carolina.

The US alleges that the balloon was conducting surveillance activities as part of a broader Chinese spy balloon program worldwide. Beijing maintains that the airship was engaged in scientific research.

Three other unknown aerial objects have since been downed over North America, although there is no indication the more recent objects are linked to China or surveillance activities. The incidents prompted Biden to direct his team to develop guidelines for the downing of aerial objects over the US.

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Black Sea Grain Deal to Be Discussion Topic During Blinken’s Trip to Europe - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - The Black Sea Grain Initiative will be a part of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's agenda during his upcoming trip to Europe, State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel said.

"I am sure that the benefits of the Black Sea Green Initiative and the desire and need to keep it alive is something that will be of a topic not just in his [Blinken's] upcoming bilateral engagements, but I'm sure also at the Munich Security Conference as well," Patel said during a press briefing on Thursday.

Blinken will visit Germany, Turkey and Greece from February 16-22 for talks on the Ukraine conflict at the Munich Security Conference, as well as on the recovery efforts after the catastrophic earthquakes in Turkey and on cooperation with Greece, according to the State Department.

On July 22, Russia, Ukraine and Turkey signed an United Nations-brokered agreement to provide a humanitarian maritime corridor for ships exporting food and fertilizer from Black Sea ports, including the Ukrainian ports of Odessa, Chornomorsk, and Yuzhne, amid the special military operation.

The grain deal was extended in November for 120 days. Russia has criticized the deal for failing to ensure fair distribution of food and fertilizer exports and for shipping the lion's share to developed countries.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) -

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The United States is not encouraging Ukraine to conduct military operations within the internationally recognized territory of the Russian Federation, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.

* As a result of negotiations, 101 Russian servicemen were returned from the territory controlled by Kiev on February 16, who were in mortal danger in captivity, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk is ready to work with Moscow to solve the problem of torture of Russian prisoners of war in Ukraine, Russian Commissioner for Human Rights Tatiana Moskalkova said.

* The civil infrastructure used in space for military purposes by Ukraine may become a legitimate target for Russia's retaliatory strike, Deputy Director of the Department for Nonproliferation and Arms Control of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Konstantin Vorontsov, said.

* Polish President Andrzej Duda and UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak agreed on the importance of stepping up support for Ukraine in the coming weeks, and also discussed the training of Ukrainian pilots on NATO aircraft, which will begin in the United Kingdom soon, the UK prime minister's office said.

* US Senators Lindsey Graham and Richard Blumenthal urged the United States and its allies to begin training Ukrainian forces on the use of advanced fighter jets, ahead of a trip by the lawmakers to the Munich Security Conference.

US-CHINA TENSIONS

* The Biden administration is clear-eyed about the threats that China poses to the United States but also sees opportunities for cooperation with the country, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.

* Beijing labeled US defense companies Raytheon Technologies and Lockheed Martin as "unreliable entities" and put them on the sanctions list, citing their weapons sales to Taiwan, the Chinese Commerce Ministry said.

* US President Joe Biden said that he intends to speak with Chinese President Xi Jinping and maintain lines of communication between Washington and Beijing following the downing of an alleged Chinese spy balloon earlier this month.

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* The Alaska region of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) intercepted four Russian aircraft near the Alaska Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) on February 14, the Defense Department said on Thursday.

WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* The United States and its Group of Seven (G7) allies will introduce another "big" sanction package on Russia around the first anniversary of the beginning of Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said on Thursday.

* The European Commission (EC)'s latest sanctions package imposed on Russia does not cover the energy sector, EC Directorate-General for Energy Ditte Juul Jorgensen said.

* Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said he would do his utmost so that the 10th package of EU sanctions against Russia would not include restrictions on oil supplies through the Druzhba pipeline and cooperation with Moscow in the nuclear sphere.

* The United States and its G7 allies will soon broaden banking sanctions on Russia and introduce additional export controls on the first anniversary of the beginning of Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, Nuland said.

* Siemens Energy, in response to a request from RIA Novosti, denied reports of a refusal to issue a permit to the company to supply equipment for the Akkuyu nuclear power plant, which is being built by Russia's Rosatom in Turkey.

AERIAL OBJECTS IN US

* The United States was initially unable to rule out the possibility that three aerial objects it recently shot down were surveillance devices, White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said on Thursday.

* The United States will take down any object that poses a threat to the safety or security of Americans and is going to update the rules for launching unmanned objects in US airspace,

President Joe Biden said on Thursday, after four unmanned aerial objects were shot down over North America this month.

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Biden Officially Sends Nomination for US Arctic Ambassador to Senate - White House

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden officially sent his nomination of Michael Sfraga as Ambassador at Large for Arctic Affairs to the Senate for approval, the White House said.

Sfraga is on track to be the first person to hold the position, following its approval by the State Department last August.

"I'm very pleased to see Dr. Mike Sfraga nominated to serve as Ambassador-at-Large for the Arctic Region. This places the United States one step closer to having dedicated, high-level diplomatic representation in the Arctic, which will allow us to advance a range of US policy priorities at a crucial time," US Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska said in a statement on Monday, after the White House announced Biden's intent to nominate Sfraga to the position.

Sfraga serves as Chair of the Arctic Research Commission, to which he was appointed by Biden in 2021. Sfraga has worked as a geographer, at think tanks, at the University of Alaska and on the Scientific Advisory Council of the Finnish Institute for International Affairs.

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UN Security Council to Discuss Minsk Agreements on Friday Morning at Russia's Request

UNITED NATIONS, February 17 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council will discuss the Minsk Agreements on Friday morning at the request of Russia, a source at the United Nations told Sputnik.

"There will be a meeting in the Security Council organized by Russia focused on the Minsk Agreements," the source said.

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Ohio Asks Biden for Medical Professionals on Ground Near Train Wreck Site - Official

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - Ohio Governor Mark DeWine asked President Joe Biden for help deploying medical professionals on the ground in the town of East Palestine where a train wreck led to the release of toxic chemicals into the environment, Ohio Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Director Anne Vogel said on Thursday.

"This morning the Governor did talk with President Biden, he has requested assistance from the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention]," Vogel said during a press conference in East Palestine. "He has requested assistance in terms of medical professionals on the ground to provide physical and mental behavioral health counseling services. so that request was formalized just a little bit ago."

EPA chief Michael Regan at the same presser urged anyone experiencing health problems or adverse health reaction to seek medical attention, and to also contact local and state health agencies so that they can collect that information as well.

Three days after the derailment on February 3, authorities burned vinyl chloride inside five tanker cars, which released hydrogen chloride and phosgene, according to media reports. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) said tests indicate the surrounding air and water are safe for residents, however, more tests are conducted daily to ensure public health safety. However, some 3,500 fish died in waterways near the derailment and several residents have complained about feeling nauseous and experiencing headaches after toxic chemicals were released into the air following the derailment.

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US Approves Possible \$670Mln Sale of HIMARS Launchers to Netherlands - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The US State Department has given a green light for a possible \$670 million sale of High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) launchers and related equipment to the Netherlands, the Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said in a statement on Thursday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of the Netherlands of High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) launchers and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$670 million," the statement said. DSCA said the package, which would include 20 M142 HIMARS launchers and 39 M30A2 Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System (GMLRS) Alternative Warhead Missile Pods, would "support the foreign policy and national security objectives of the United States" by boosting the defenses of a key NATO ally.

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US EPA Chief Says Air Monitoring Near Ohio Train Wreck Has Not Picked Up Health Concerns

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) chief Michael Regan said on Thursday that air monitoring in the Ohio town of East Palestine shows there are no health concerns following the controlled release of toxic chemicals into the environment from a rail car after a train derailment that occurred in the area earlier this month.

"Since the fire went out, EPA air monitoring has not detected any levels of health concern in the community that are attributed to the train derailment," Regan said during a press conference in East Palestine.

The EPA has assisted with the screening of more than 480 homes under the voluntary screening program offered to residents in East Palestine and no detections of toxic chemicals like vinyl chloride or hydrogen chloride were identified, according to Regan. The federal government is continuing to make those screenings available to any residents that want to have their indoor air tested, he added.

The federal government is also working with state and local governments in determining what impact the spill from the train derailment has had on surface and groundwater in the town in order to ensure that the derailment has not had an effect on drinking water supplies, Regan said.

The Ohio Department of Health has recommended that residents use bottled water, Regan noted.

On Wednesday, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine said in a statement that drinking water in the city of East Palestine is safe to drink after a new test detected no contaminants following the train derailment.

Three days after the derailment on February 3, authorities burned vinyl chloride inside five tanker cars, which released hydrogen chloride and phosgene, according to media reports. The EPA said tests indicate the surrounding air and water are safe for residents, however, more tests are conducted daily to ensure public health safety.

However, some 3,500 fish died in waterways near the derailment and several residents have complained about feeling nauseous and experiencing headaches after toxic chemicals were released into the air following the derailment.

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US Unveils Framework Declaration on Responsible Use of Military AI - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The United States on Thursday unveiled its framework on the responsible use of artificial intelligence (AI) technology by militaries, US Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins said in a statement.

"Today, I announced the US framework for a Political Declaration on Responsible Military Use of Artificial Intelligence and Autonomy. The Declaration is a first step towards building consensus on responsible State behavior in this area," Jenkins said via Twitter.

The US is committed to promoting rules that enhance transparency, predictability and stability in the military use of AI, Jenkins said.

The declaration was unveiled at the 2023 Summit on Responsible AI in the Military Domain. The declaration consists of a series of non-legally binding guidelines on best practices for responsible use of AI in a defense context.

For example, the declaration states that countries should: ensure military AI capabilities comply with international law; maintain human control and involvement for all actions concerning the

use of nuclear weapons; develop military AI capabilities with auditable methodologies; and engineer military AI to avoid unintended consequences.

The US welcomes engagement with any country interested in building an international consensus on the issue, Jenkins added.

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Actor Bruce Willis Diagnosed With Frontotemporal Dementia - Family

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - Actor Bruce Willis has been diagnosed with frontotemporal dementia, his family said in a statement on Thursday, calling it a "cruel disease" that has no known treatment.

"Since we announced Bruce's diagnosis of aphasia in spring 2022, Bruce's condition has progressed and we now have a more specific diagnosis: frontotemporal dementia (known as FTD)," his family said in a statement on the Association for Frontotemporal Degeneration website.

The statement, signed by Willis' ex-wife Demi Moore, current wife Emma Heming and his children, said communications challenges are just one symptom of the disease, which is the most common type of dementia for people under 60.

"Today there are no treatments for the disease, a reality that we hope can change in the years ahead. As Bruce's condition advances, we hope that any media attention can be focused on shining a light on this disease that needs far more awareness and research," the statement said.

The family thanked Willis' supporters for their "love and compassion" over the past few months since his initial diagnosis of aphasia and said the actor, if he were able to communicate, would have wanted to bring global attention to the disease and connect those who are suffering from it.

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Biden Says Nothing Ties Objects Recently Shot Down to China or Surveillance

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The objects recently shot down over US airspace are most likely tied to private companies, and no evidence suggests that they are related to China's balloon program, US President Joe Biden said on Thursday.

"We don't yet know exactly what these three objects were. But nothing right now suggests they're related to China's spy balloon program, or they were surveillance vehicles from other any other country. The intelligence community's current assessment is that these three objects were most likely balloons tied to private companies, recreation or research institutions, studying weather or conducting other scientific research," Biden said at a presser.

Over the weekend, the US military shot down three unmanned objects over North American airspace.

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US to Take Down Any Object Posing Threat, Update Rules for Unmanned Aerial Objects - Biden

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The United States will take down any object that poses a threat to the safety or security of Americans and is going to update the rules for launching unmanned objects in US airspace, President Joe Biden said on Thursday, after four unmanned aerial objects were shot down over North America this month.

"If any object presents a threat to the safety and security of American people, I will take it down," Biden said. "We'll update the rules and regulations for launching and maintaining unmanned objects in the skies above the United States of America."

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Biden Says US Will Remain Engaged With China, Expects to Speak with Xi

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he intends to speak with Chinese President Xi Jinping and maintain lines of communication between Washington and Beijing following the downing of an alleged Chinese spy balloon earlier this month.

"We will continue to engage with China... I will remain in communication with President Xi," Biden said during a press conference. "I expect to be speaking with President Xi, and I hope we get to the bottom of this."

Biden delivered remarks Thursday on the downing of several aerial objects over North America earlier this month, including an alleged Chinese surveillance balloon. Beijing maintains that the airship was engaged in scientific research.

Biden said during the remarks that he will not apologize for his decision to shoot down the balloon, but remains dedicated to responsibly managing competition with China to avoid conflict.

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Democrats in Private Raise Concerns Over Biden's Age Ahead of Nomination Decision—Reports

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) – Democratic lawmakers in private discussions have raised concerns over US President Joe Biden's age ahead of his decision on whether to run for the office in 2024, Politico reported on Thursday, citing a number of lawmakers.

The relative success of the Democrats in the recent midterm elections has not changed the rhetoric of behind-the-scenes discussions in the ranks of Democratic lawmakers, who continue to be wary of Biden's age and his chances of running a successful presidential campaign next year, according to the report.

While Biden's age is a constant topic of discussion, only a few Democrats are willing to speak up about their concerns, while the bulk of Democrats are essentially afraid to say something on the record, the report said.

"He's a president of great competence and success, I admire the heck out of President Biden," the report cited Rep. Dean Phillips as saying. "And if he were 15-20 years younger it would be a no-brainer to nominate him, but considering his age it's absurd we're not promoting competition but trying to extinguish it."

There is no consensus among Democrats on this issue with the report citing a senator who allegedly said that only a few of his colleagues in the Senate actually want Biden to run again and that the party has to come up with some sort of "an alignment of interest" with the president to get him off the "narcotic" of the office.

Other Democrats are concerned with how much campaigning Biden would be able to do given his age, according to the report.

The report suggests that Biden's team is eyeing an April announcement or the same month he began campaigning in 2019, the report added.

On Wednesday, former US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley said in her first speech as a presidential candidate that she is running for a "strong and proud America." In a jab at incumbent President Joe Biden, Haley said her team will seek mandatory mental competency tests for politicians over 75 years old.

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Lockheed Martin Skunk Works, BAE Systems Test 2 New UAS for US Marine Corps - Release

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin Skunk Works and BAE Systems have successfully tested two new unmanned aerial systems (UAS) for the US Marine Corps, the companies announced in a press release on Thursday.

"BAE Systems and Lockheed Martin Skunk Works conducted a successful test of the Stalker and Indago small uncrewed aerial systems (UAS) on an Amphibious Combat Vehicle Command, Control, Communication and Computers/Uncrewed Aerial Systems (ACV C4/UAS) variant," the release said.

Both UAS vehicles will provide previously unprecedented, long-endurance reconnaissance capabilities to support the Marine Corps' expeditionary warfare and battle management capabilities when deployed on the ACV C4/UAS, the release said.

"BAE Systems tested Skunk Works' Stalker and Indago UAS along with a number of other technology suppliers as part of contractor verification testing, a key event in the ACV C4/UAS program's lifecycle," the release added.

Now that contractor verification testing is complete, the Marine Corps will conduct its own series of tests to evaluate if the ACV C4/UAS is a capable and cost-effective Government Off The Shelf (GOTS) solution for the Advanced Reconnaissance Vehicle (ARV) program, according to the release.

From: Martin Sieff - martinsieff1@gmail.com

Subject:

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UN on EU Call to Remove Russia From SC: Excluding Members Unhelpful in Search for Peace

UNITED NATIONS, February 16 (Sputnik) - The United Nations stands for the view of not isolating member states amid calls in the EU to exclude Russia from the UN Security Council, Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, the European Parliament passed a resolution that called on EU states to further isolate Moscow including by removing Russia from the UNSC.

"Our principal position is that we do not believe, as far as the United Nations is concerned, that excluding member states is conducive to long term search for peace," Dujarric told a briefing, when answering a question on whether Russia should be excluded from the UN Security Council.

The European Parliament resolution also asks EU states to consider supplying Ukraine with fighter jets, helicopters, missile systems and more ammunition.

On February 15, the European Commission head Ursula von der Leyen said that the Commission has proposed a new package of sanctions against Russia in the amount of 11 billion euros (\$11.79 billion).

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Nuland Calls Russia's Alleged Declaration of New Offensive in Ukraine 'Very Pathetic'

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) – US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland on Thursday called Russia's alleged declaration of a new military offensive in Ukraine "very pathetic" and noted that Ukraine is preparing its own counteroffensive for later. "Russia has declared that it is launching a new offensive. Well, if this is it, it is very pathetic, I would say. Ukraine itself is planning its own counter-offensive for later on," Nuland said during a press briefing.

On Tuesday, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that Russia shows no signs that it is prepared for peace talks on Ukraine since it is allegedly preparing for new offensive operations there.

Moscow so far has not made any public announcement with respect to any new offensive operations in Ukraine that have already begun or are due to start in the near future.

American officials, including representatives of the US State and Defense departments, have repeatedly announced the impending counterattack of the Ukrainian armed forces in the Donbas region against advancing Russian forces there, which is supposedly due to begin in the spring. There is currently no official confirmation of these plans from Kiev.

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US Seeks to Become Sales Partner to Countries Relying on Russian Arms - Nuland

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The United States is working to become an alternative arms sales partner for countries dependent on Russian weapons amid Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said on Thursday.

"So we have an opportunity not only to ensure our own stocks are replenished, but countries like Ukraine that have a long term defense requirement, as we talked about before, can be replenished, but the countries that have made a bad bet on Russian weapons have other options, and we're also working on that," Nuland said during a press briefing.

Countries like India that are fully dependent on Russian weapons should understand they will not be able to resupply their stocks, Nuland said.

Earlier on Thursday, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said the United States is reviewing its weapons stockpiles and may have to increase military spending after seeing the high rate at which ammunition has been used in the Ukraine conflict.

Ammunition is "very expensive," Milley was reported as saying.

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Biden to Speak This Afternoon About US Response to Recent Aerial Objects - White House

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will deliver remarks Thursday afternoon about the United States' response to recent aerial objects over North America, the White House said in a schedule update.

"In the afternoon, the President will deliver remarks on the United States' response to recent aerial objects," the White House said. The remarks are set for 2:00 p.m. EST, according to the White House schedule.

Earlier this month, the US shot down an alleged Chinese surveillance balloon over the Atlantic Ocean. Since then, three other aerial objects of unknown origin have been shot down over North America due to safety and security concerns.

The US has no evidence the most recent objects were gathering intelligence, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said earlier this week. No entity or individual has come forward to claim responsibility for the objects either, Kirby also said.

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YouTube CEO Susan Wojcicki Steps Down to Start 'New Chapter' in Her Life

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - YouTube CEO Susan Wojcicki announced on Thursday that she would step down from her position to begin a "new chapter" in her life focused on family, health and personal projects.

"Today, after nearly 25 years here, I've decided to step back from my role as the head of YouTube and start a new chapter focused on my family, health and personal projects I'm passionate about," Wojcicki said in a letter sent to YouTube employees.

Wojcicki said in the letter that the time was right for her to make this decision considering the incredible leadership team in the company and nominated YouTube's Chief Product Officer Neal Mohan as the next CEO.

YouTube's future will be full of exciting opportunities, notably with the development of artificial intelligence, she said.

Wojcicki thanked the many youtubers with whom she worked over the past 25 years, who allowed for the creation of the most important "creative economies" while staying committed to responsible growth.

As she departs from YouTube, Wojcicki said she would be supporting her successor with the transition, adding she will continue working with YouTube and coaching teams and creators.

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US to Support Ukraine's Fight to Return All Its Land Within Recognized Borders— Nuland

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration will support Ukraine's fight to return all of the lands within its internationally recognized borders and is already supporting Kiev to prepare for the next "hard push" to regain their territory amid Russia's ongoing special military operation, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said on Thursday.

"[US] President [Joe Biden] has said ... that we will support Ukraine for as long as it takes.

Ukraine is fighting for the return of all of its land within its international borders. We are supporting them, including in preparing the next hard push to regain their territory," Nuland said during a press briefing.

Earlier in the day, Politico reported that US State Secretary Antony Blinken said in a video call with experts on Wednesday that the United States is not actively encouraging Ukraine to retake control of Crimea, but the decision is Kiev's alone.

On Tuesday, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said that the United States with its allies and partners expect to see Ukraine conduct an offensive "sometime" in the spring.

American officials, including representatives of the US State and Defense departments, have repeatedly announced the impending counterattack of the Ukrainian armed forces in the Donbas region against advancing Russian forces there, which is supposedly due to begin in the spring. There is currently no official confirmation of these plans from Kiev.

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Canada to Deploy Navy Vessels to Conduct Surveillance Off Haitian Coast - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - Canada will deploy Navy vessels to conduct surveillance off the coast of Haiti in the coming weeks, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Thursday.

"Today I am announcing that Canada will also deploy Royal Canadian Navy vessels to conduct surveillance, gather intelligence and maintain a maritime presence off the Haitian coast in the coming weeks," Trudeau said.

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US Rates Must Go Above 5%, Stay There a While to Fight Inflation - Fed's Mester

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - US interest rates need to rise to above 5% and remain there an extended time in order to bring inflation down meaningfully, the Federal Reserve's regional head for Cleveland Loretta Mester said Thursday.

"How far the Fed goes above 5% depends on data," Mester, who is president and chief executive at the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, said in a live-streamed speech. "Upside risks to inflation remain in place."

Rates currently stand at a peak of 4.75% after eight hikes by the Fed over the past year. The central bank's last rate revision was on February 1 and its next is due on March 22.

The Fed added 450 basis points to rates since March via eight hikes, in its bid to control runaway inflation. Prior to that, US rates peaked at just 25 basis points, as the central bank slashed them to nearly zero after the global COVID-19 outbreak in 2020.

The Fed's first post-COVID hike was a 25-basis point increase in March last year. It then moved up with a 50-basis point increase in May. After that it executed four back-to-back jumbo-sized hikes of 75 basis points from June through November. Since then, it has returned to a more modest 50-basis point increase in December and a 25-basis point hike in February.

Mester's comments came after US wholesale prices, one of the key determinants of inflation, rose their most in seven months in January, according to a Labor Department report on Thursday that seemed to further complicate the Fed's job of keeping a lid on price growth.

Wholesale prices, or what retailers pay when they buy products from manufacturers in large quantities, jumped 0.7% in January, the most since June last year, when they rose 1.2%, the Labor Department's so-called Producer Price Index, or PPI, report said.

A separate measure of wholesale prices which strips out volatile food and energy costs - called core PPI - climbed 0.6% last month, the most in 10 months.

The PPI reading itself came two days after the broader Consumer Price Index, or CPI, report for January, which also showed stickier-than-expected inflation in the United States.

The CPI rose 6.4% in the 12 months to January, marking the smallest inflationary growth since October 2021. But for January itself, the index rose 0.5% after a 0.1% decline in December.

Core month-on-month CPI, which strips out volatile food and energy prices, was up 0.4% in January, unchanged from December.

The back-to-back reports on inflation underscore the challenge to the Fed's plans to have smaller rate hikes this year after a year of aggressive monetary tightening.

Mester said she was "not yet certain" whether the Fed will need to raise interest rates by higher amounts when it meets on March 22.

"The Fed can accelerate the pace of hikes if conditions warrant it," she said. "More upside inflation surprises may prompt the Fed to tighten policy more aggressively. Recent data shows the demand side of the economy is not softening as expected."

But in an acknowledgement of the risks that lay ahead for the economy, she said: "We do not want to surprise markets with Fed actions that will slow growth and increase unemployment."

The US economy is forecast to grow 2.5% in the first quarter of 2023, slowing from a 2.9% expansion in the fourth quarter. The job market, meanwhile, continues adding hundreds of thousands of jobs each month and higher wages for workers. The Fed has identified jobs and wage growth as among the principal drivers of inflation.

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Train Derails Outside Detroit, At Least Six Cars Off Track - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - A train derailed just outside Detroit in Van Buren Township, Michigan, this morning with one car carrying hazardous materials, Fox News reported on Thursday.

The cause of the derailment was not immediately clear, according to the report, but there are no injuries reported and the area is not a hazmat situation. The one car determined to be carrying hazardous materials is reportedly showing no sign of leaking or damage.

The most recent derailment comes two weeks after a train carrying hazardous material derailed in East Palestine, Ohio, releasing chemicals into the air and causing health concerns to those in the vicinity of the derailment.

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US, Allies to Broaden Russia Banking Sanctions, Export Controls - Nuland

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The United States and its Group of Seven (G7) allies will soon broaden banking sanctions on Russia and introduce additional export controls on the first anniversary of the beginning of Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said on Thursday.

"We are also broadening banking sanctions, we're going to broaden our export controls, which will capture much of the illicit trade, and, particularly, we are targeting areas of concern and countries that are helping Russia evade sanctions," Nuland said during a press briefing.

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US, G7 Allies to Unveil New 'Big' Russia Sanctions Around February 24 - Nuland

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The United States and its Group of Seven (G7) allies will introduce another "big" sanction package on Russia around the first anniversary of the beginning of Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said on Thursday.

"I think you will see around the 24th [of February] a big new package of sanctions from both the US and from all of our G7 partners. These sanctions will deepen and broaden in certain categories where we have been active before, particularly in limiting the flow of technology to the Russian defense industry, high-tech equipment, etc., to sanctioning those individuals who are directly involved in prosecuting this war and supporting it," Nuland said during a press briefing.

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NORAD Intercepts 4 Russian Aircraft Near Alaska Second Time in 2 Days - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The Alaska region of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) intercepted four Russian aircraft near the Alaska Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) on February 14, the Defense Department said on Thursday.

This is the second time Russian aircraft have been intercepted near the ADIZ in two days, the Defense Department said in a press release.

However, the Defense Department noted that Russian activity near the ADIZ occurs regularly and is not seen as a threat by the United States.

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US 'Sees Plainly' Both Threat Posed by China, Opportunities for Cooperation - Kirby

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is clear-eyed about the threats that China poses to the United States but also sees opportunities for cooperation with the country, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday. "We see plainly the threats that they [China] pose in some of those domains, but we also see plainly opportunities for cooperation," Kirby said in remarks at Georgetown University. The Biden administration sees numerous areas for potential cooperation, including climate change and counter-terrorism, as well as trade and economics, Kirby said. But he added that the US administration remains focused on potential threats to US security posed by China. "We're not blind to the kinds of coercive tactics that China is using in the Indo-Pacific, where they're trying to bully some of their neighboring nations, we're not blind to the influence that they're trying to expand and grow in places like Africa, South America or even the Middle East, and we're certainly not blind to concerns over the theft of intellectual property or the kinds of things that they are trying to prove capable of doing in space or cyberspace ... [or] their growing arsenal of nuclear weapons," Kirby said.

Kirby also emphasized that neither President Joe Biden nor President Xi Jinping believes that these tensions have to evolve into conflict.

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US Senators Call for Fighter Jets, Long-Range Missiles for Ukraine Ahead of Munich Talks

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - US Senators Lindsey Graham and Richard Blumenthal on Thursday urged the United States and its allies to begin training Ukrainian forces on the use of advanced fighter jets, ahead of a trip by the lawmakers to the Munich Security Conference. "The next thing [Ukraine] needs is fighter jets. You can't do combined arms operations without an air force. The MiG-29 is obsolete," Graham said during a press conference. "We would urge the [Biden] administration and all of our allies to start the training process now for advanced fighter jets for Ukraine."

Hopefully Ukraine will also soon be provided with Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS), which have a range of up to 190 miles (300km), Blumenthal added.

The US has so far been reluctant to provide Ukraine with the long-range missiles, as the Biden administration has said it is neither encouraging nor enabling operations by Ukraine in Russian territory.

The lawmakers said they will reaffirm US support for Ukraine while engaging with partners from around the world at the Munich Security Conference. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is also set to attend the event and meet with officials to discuss continued support for Ukraine.

Earlier on Thursday, Ukrainian Ambassador to the United Kingdom Vadym Prystaiko said Kiev will receive Western fighter jets at a later stage of the conflict and after current military needs are sorted out.

Earlier this month, Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council secretary Oleksiy Danilov said it is only a "matter of time" before the US provides Ukraine with F-16 fighter jets.

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US Senator Says Relationship With Russia Not Going to Repair for 'Long, Long Time'

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) – The US relationship with Russia will remain beyond repair for a "long, long time" and it will be decades before anybody decides to do business with Moscow again, US senator James Risch said on Thursday.

"Our relationship with Russia is not going to repair for a long, long time, nor is obviously [with] Ukraine or Europe. There's not going to be a reconciliation commission, where we all get together with these people," Risch said during a Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources hearing. "[I]t's going to be decades and decades before anybody that is in the right mind does business with Russia again."

In December, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that if and when Russia returns to joint work with the West, it will be conducted on new principles since the old approaches no longer work.

The start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, marked a turning point and the beginning of a severe downturn in bilateral relations between Moscow and Washington, which had previously also been tense.

After the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the West stepped up sanctions pressure on Russia, which led to an increase in prices for electricity, fuel, and food in Europe and the United States.

Russian President Vladimir Putin earlier said the policy to contain and weaken Russia is a long-term strategy for the West, and sanctions have dealt a severe blow to the entire global economy. According to him, the main goal of the West is to make the lives of millions of people worse. Russia has repeatedly said it will solve all the problems the West creates for it.

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US Inflation Worries Heightened by January's Producer Prices Increase - Labor Dept. Report

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - US wholesale prices, one of the key determinants of inflation, rose the most in seven months in January, according to a Labor Department report on Thursday that seemed to further complicate the Federal Reserve's job of keeping a lid on price growth.

Wholesale prices, or what retailers pay when they buy products from manufacturers in large quantities, jumped 0.7% in January, the most since June last year, when they rose 1.2%, the Labor Department's Producer Price Index (PPI) report said.

A separate measure of wholesale prices which strips out volatile food and energy costs - called core PPI - increased 0.6% last month, the most in ten months.

The PPI reading comes just two days after the broader Consumer Price Index (CPI) report for January, which also showed stickier-than-expected inflation in the United States.

The CPI rose 6.4% in the 12 months to January, marking the smallest inflationary growth since October 2021. But for January itself, the index rose 0.5% after a 0.1% decline in December.

Core month-on-month CPI, which strips out volatile food and energy prices, was up 0.4% in January, unchanged from December.

The back-to-back reports on inflation underscore the challenge to the Federal Reserve's plans to have smaller rate hikes this year after a year of aggressive monetary tightening.

"This is a hot number and will add to the worries about sticky inflation," economist Adam Button said on the ForexLive platform.

The CPI hit a 40-year high in June when it grew at an annual rate of 9.1%, versus the Fed's inflation target of just 2% per year. In a bid to control surging prices, the central bank has added 450 basis points to interest rates since March via eight rate hikes.

Prior to that, interest rates peaked at just 25 basis points, as the central bank slashed them to nearly zero after the global COVID-19 outbreak in 2020.

The Fed began with a 25-basis point hike in March, then moved up to a 50-basis point increase in May. After that it executed four back-to-back hikes of 75 basis points from June through November. Since then, it has returned to a more modest 50-basis point increase in December and a 25-basis point hike in February. This week's inflation reports have had Fed officials dismissing any notion that the central bank might be done soon with rate hikes.

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US Sets Up Task Force to Prevent Nation-State Adversaries From Acquiring US Technologies

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) – The US departments of justice and commerce announced on Thursday creating a task force to enforce US laws protecting the nation's advanced technologies from being illegally acquired and used by nation-state adversaries.

"Today, the Department of Justice and the Department of Commerce are launching the Disruptive Technology Strike Force," the joint statement said.

The group will bring together experts from the FBI, other federal agencies and their local partners to target illicit actors, strengthen supply chains and protect critical technological assets from being acquired or used by nation-state adversaries, it added.

Assistant Attorney General Matthew Olsen and Assistant Secretary of Commerce Matthew Axelrod will co-chair the new strike force.

The group will prevent "nation-state adversaries" such as China, Iran, Russia, and North Korea from acquiring advanced technologies, which these countries may use to enhance their military

capabilities or support "mass surveillance programs that enable human rights abuses," the statement said.

The strike force will investigate and prosecute criminal violations of export laws, enhancing administrative enforcement of US export controls. The group will also collaborate with the private sector and other like-minded countries to coordinate law enforcement actions and disruption strategies. It will operate in 12 metropolitan regions across the United States, including New York, Los Angeles, Washington, DC, Chicago and Miami.

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US Citizens Feel Less Financially Secure in 2023 Amidst High Inflationary Levels – Survey

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) – US citizens have expressed feeling less financially secure in the first months of 2023, than at the end of 2022 amidst rising inflation and higher interest rates, a Country Financial Security Index survey revealed on Thursday.

"In early 2023, Americans are less likely to feel financially secure than at the end of 2022; a drop of four percent to 55 percent of Americans rating their financial health as good or excellent. This is more in line with early 2022 (56%)," the survey found.

Although 15% of the respondents affirmed being in an "excellent" financial situation, the vast majority of US citizens expressed that the current inflation levels have somewhat to greatly affected their stability, with 69% of them facing difficulties, the survey said.

Moreover, two out of five respondents, about 42%, rated their financial situation as being greatly affected by inflation, and while many are struggling with the current inflationary levels, not everyone is affected similarly.

According to the survey, Latin Americans are more likely to be greatly affected than Black Americans, with 49% placing themselves in that category, as opposed to 13% affirming they are not facing any sort of financial challenge.

While high inflation remains the main challenge to the surveyed finances, increasing interest rates are also negatively affecting the financial situation of many, the survey continued, with 42% placing themselves in the great deal or somewhat category.

The survey found that Black and Latin Americans were more likely to suffer "a great deal" from the current interest rates, respectively 29% and 25%.

Furthermore, the current situation is increasingly pushing US citizens to dip into their savings.

The survey revealed that two out of three respondents are taking actions which include reducing the amount saved or invested, retrieving funds from their savings, and delaying big transactions, respectively 28%, 27% and 23%.

Over the same period, 19% of the surveyed said having taken more credit debt, 18% spent less than expected in big transactions, and 12% have borrowed money from their relatives and friends.

This Country Financial/Ipsos Poll was conducted February 3 - 5, 2023, by Ipsos using the probability-based Knowledge Panel. The poll was based on a nationally representative probability sample of 1,029 general population adults aged 18 or older.

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US Not Encouraging Ukrainian Military Operations In Russia Itself - White House's Kirby

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The United States is not encouraging Ukraine to conduct military operations within the internationally recognized territory of the Russian Federation, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday. "In terms of any potential operations into Russia, we are neither encouraging nor enabling the Ukrainian forces to do that," Kirby said during an event at Georgetown University. However, Kirby said that support would remain for Ukraine should they express a desire to retake Crimea from Russia, as the US has never recognized their claim to the peninsula. The US likewise rejects Moscow's claims to other former regions of Ukraine that voted to join the Russian Federation. The statement comes as the US continues to provide military support, including long-range weapons, capable of striking Crimea, to Ukraine, as well as assisting Kiev in targeting and other tactical matters.

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US Could Not Initially Rule Out That 3 Objects it Downed Were Surveillance Devices - Kirby

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The United States was initially unable to rule out the possibility that three aerial objects it recently shot down were surveillance devices, White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said on Thursday. "The president again got the recommendation from the military that the proper course of action was to down them, for two principal reasons: One, we couldn't rule out that they were surveillance devices, and their flight path did in certain cases take them over potentially sensitive sites," Kirby said. "We couldn't say definitively that they were spy balloons or spy objects, but that they could be." Kirby added that the US later determined that the objects were most likely commercial and could have been weather balloons or scientific devices.

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European Commission's Latest Sanctions on Russia Do Not Cover Energy Sector - Jorgensen

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The European Commission (EC)'s latest sanctions package imposed on Russia does not cover the energy sector, EC Directorate-General for Energy Ditte Juul Jorgensen said in a congressional hearing on Thursday.

"We presented a tenth sanctions package yesterday. It does not cover these aspects but of course, we will see what happens and we'll continue developing our response," Jorgensen told the US Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources.

Jorgensen noted that the European Union has five member states dependent on the Russian state energy conglomerate Rosatom and the EC was working to help them reduce their reliance on it.

Jorgensen also said the EC is concerned about the high dependence on Russian uranium. Sanctions on Russia's nuclear sector would likely have a limited impact at this point and could cause various additional challenges for the European Union, Jorgensen added.

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US Energy Official Calls for Cutting Off US Dollars to Rosatom – Senate Hearing
WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) – Andrew Light, assistant secretary of the US Department of Energy's Office of International Affairs, called on Thursday for the US to stop sending dollars to Russian state energy conglomerate Rosatom.

"We should no longer send American dollars to Rosatom – especially after their disregard for nuclear safety in Ukraine," Light said in his testimony at a Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources hearing.

Light said it was essential for the US to invest in building domestic uranium capacity and to diversify its uranium supply chains in order to reduce reliance on uranium from Russia and China.

According to the US Energy Information Administration, Russia is the United States' fourth largest source of uranium. In 2021, 14% of the uranium the US purchased came from Russia.

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UN Launches Humanitarian Appeal for \$1Bln to Help Earthquake-Hit Turkey - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, February 16 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has launched a humanitarian appeal to collect \$1 billion to help people impacted by the catastrophic earthquakes in Turkey, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

"Today, the United Nations is launching a \$1 billion humanitarian appeal for the people of Turkey suffering from the most devastating earthquakes to hit the country in a century," the spokesperson said in a statement.

The funding aims to help meet the needs of some 5.1 million people for the duration of three months, the statement added.

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US Produces Discovery in Vinnik Case as Ordered by Court, With Limitations - Filing

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - US government prosecutors produced discovery in the criminal case against Russian businessman Alexander Vinnik as ordered by the court in December, but with limitations on certain items, a status report filed by the government said. "The government has made eight discovery productions to defense counsel in this case, four of them since the last hearing," the status report, filed Wednesday, said. "With certain limitations as conveyed to defense counsel and described below, the government has produced the four categories of discovery as ordered by the Court."

In December, a US court ordered the government to produce discovery including search warrants and returns for digital data and financial records, devices and documents on their chain of custody, and documents related to French and Greek proceedings involving Vinnik. The United States charged Vinnik with financial crimes, including money laundering, linked to his cryptocurrency trading platform BTC-e. The US accuses Vinnik of enabling criminal activity through BTC-e by obscuring and anonymizing transactions and sources of funds. Vinnik denies the charges against him.

The government is still working to decrypt certain data from password-protected items, but informed Vinnik's defense attorneys that they can provide copies of the items in their original, encrypted state upon request, the filing said.

The government has not produced full images of all servers and network traffic obtained in their investigation due to their "voluminous" nature, the filing also said. However, the government has offered to make those items available to the defense for inspection and provide images of particular requested servers, the filing said.

Moreover, certain information related to confidential informants, undercover operations or sensitive investigations has been withheld, but to the extent such information is discoverable, it will be provided in advance of trial, the filing said.

The court is set to hold a status conference for Vinnik's case on Friday.

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US Kills 5 Al-Shabaab Terrorists in Airstrike in Somalia - AFRICOM

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - The United States has eliminated five members of the al-Shabaab terror group (banned in Russia) in an air strike in Somalia undertaken at the request of the country's federal government, the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) said on Thursday.

"The initial assessment is the strike killed five al-Shabaab fighters. Given the remote location of the operation, the command assesses that no civilians were injured or killed," AFRICOM said in a statement.

The strike took place on February 15 in a remote area approximately 460km northwest of Somalia's capital Mogadishu, it added.

Al-Shabaab is based in Somalia and is linked to the al-Qaeda terror group (banned in Russia). The former has long engaged in an insurgency campaign against the Somali federal government and staged numerous terror attacks in an effort to impose a radical version of Sharia law in the country.